News Release

Texas Animal Health Commission
Box 12966 * Austin, Texas 78711 * (800) 550-8242 * FAX (512) 719-0719
Bob Hillman, DVM * Executive Director
For info, contact Carla Everett, information officer, at 1-800-550-8242, ext. 710,
or ceverett@tahc.state.tx.us

For immediate release---

Premises Identification Program Ready; Field Trial for Animal Identification Also Launched

Ranchers and other livestock facility owners from every facet of the Texas livestock and poultry industry can now sign up for a unique "premises identification number," for their livestock facilities. The premises identification number will identify the location of livestock operations in the state. It is the first step in implementing a national system for quickly tracing livestock and poultry for disease investigations or during a disease outbreak or animal health emergency. The Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC) also is launching a year-long pilot project with a number of ranches, feedlots, livestock markets, slaughter plants and other facilities to test the durability and reliability of electronic ear tags, related equipment and databases for identifying and tracking individual animals.

"The national premises and animal identification system has been under development for several years, with input and ideas from nearly 70 federal and state animal health agencies and livestock industry associations," said Dr. Bob Hillman, a member of the Secretary's Advisory Subcommittee on the National Animal Identification System. He serves as Texas' state veterinarian and heads the TAHC, the state's livestock and poultry health regulatory agency.

"The U.S. must have a reliable and efficient method for tracking and finding livestock and poultry during an animal disease investigation or when an animal health emergency occurs," Dr. Hillman said. He noted that producers and organizations have discussed at great length, the need for information to remain confidential. To protect data in regards to premises and animal identification, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, state-level agencies, such as the TAHC, and livestock organizations and associations are seeking national and state legislation to protect the data from public release or access.

"Regulatory agencies do not need or want access to production data, but specific information, such as the age and class of animal, as well as movement information is critical for finding potentially infected or exposed animals during a disease situation," he said.

Today, it can take days to track the movement of livestock, to ensure that all exposed or diseased animals have been detected, Dr. Hillman pointed out. He predicted that, by 2008, when the national system is fully implemented and mandatory, tracking livestock movements could be streamlined, greatly enhancing disease eradication efforts. He stressed that the ability to rapidly identify animals and trace livestock or poultry movements is crucial to an effective animal disease response.

Dr. Hillman explained that the national animal identification system, also called "NAIS," has two major components. The first, he said, is the unique premises — or facility — identification, which identifies the location of livestock operations. This seven-character alphabetic and numerical 'address' is to be assigned to ranches and other sites where livestock or poultry are maintained or moved. Premises information will reside on a database, managed by each state and accessible only by animal health officials. Dr. Hillman said facility owners can obtain a premises identification number now by calling the TAHC's headquarters in Austin at 1-800-550-8242. By late January, ranchers and facility owners in Texas also may register online through the TAHC's web page at http://www.tahc.state.tx.us

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Add one/Premises and Animal Identification

"The second component of the national system—animal identification--is ready for 'field-testing.' This involves the unique identification of each head of livestock moved from its original herd. For cattle, sheep, goats, cervidae (deer) and some other species of livestock, the identification device will be an electronic ear tag, also called a radio frequency (RFID) identification device. For other species, such as swine and poultry, the number can be applied to groups of animals, if they spend their entire production life together as a group or unit," he said.

Dr. Hillman explained that the TAHC, Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry; and the Osage Nation in Oklahoma are working cooperatively on a year-long pilot project, funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), to test various aspects of the premises and animal identification. Field tests also are being conducted in at least 20 other states, to ensure the system will function well when it is fully implemented, said Dr. Hillman.

"In Texas, we will work with specified ranches and livestock facilities, equipment suppliers and computer data service providers to test the effectiveness, durability and compatibility of equipment and databases for identifying and tracking individual animals," said Dr. Hillman.

"As many as 80,000 individually numbered electronic tags will be used by the pilot project participants, so cattle, sheep, goats or domestic deer can be identified prior to change of ownership or commingling with animals owned by other ranchers or farmers. The tags may be applied to animals before they leave the farm and ranch, or upon arrival at feedlots or order buyers' facilities, at livestock markets or other livestock sites. This will give facility owners and managers an opportunity to evaluate the system and calculate the costs and time involved with tagging animals, and collecting and reporting animal movement data. Implantable electronic devices will be used for identifying and tracking horses.

Unless a tag is broken or lost, an animal is to receive only one during its lifetime. The unique 15-digit number on each electronic ear tag or implantable device can be 'read and recorded' with a hand-held or stationary tag reader. Ear tags also are imprinted with the number, so the information can be accessed, even if readers are unavailable or out of service.

When identified animals are sold, moved or harvested, project participants will report the event to third-party data service providers by computer, fax or mail, Dr. Hillman explained. Animal tag numbers will be correlated in the database to premises identification 'addresses.'

A major aspect of the project will involve determining problems that occur when integrating information from several data collection systems into a central or common database. Ultimately, when an animal's number is queried, a report should list all the premise numbers where the animal had been maintained. Likewise, when a premise number is queried, the list of related animal identification numbers should appear. When an animal is harvested, its number will be retired.

"With the 'roll-out' for the premises identification system, and field trials underway for animal identification, we are much closer to the goal of fighting disease more efficiently and effectively," said Dr. Hillman. "Once the field trials are completed across the U.S., improvements can be made before the animal identification system is launched nationally. By that time, we hope to have confidentiality issues, and any equipment and database compatibility problems evaluated, addressed and resolved."

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